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Dame Ethel Smyth: Pioneer of English Opera

Eugene Gates



Special points of interest:

- Ethel Smyth and English opera

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“I feel I must fight for [my music], because I want women to turn their minds to big and difficult jobs; not just to go on hugging the shore, afraid to put out to sea.”¹ When Ethel Smyth wrote these words in the early years of her career, she had little idea of the protracted battle against prejudice that lay ahead of her. Smyth was certainly not England’s first woman composer. But while most of her predecessors, because of social circumstances and limited training, had been forced to confine their creative endeavours to the production of parlor music, she set her sights on the conquest of the opera house and concert stage. Her published works include six operas, a concert mass, a double concerto, a choral symphony, songs with piano and orchestral accompaniment, organ pieces and chamber music.² Although her compositions won the admiration of many of her fellow musicians—Tchaikovsky, Debussy, Bruno Walter, Sir Thomas Beecham, and Sir Donald Tovey,³ to name but a few—the record of her creative achievements has been swept into the dark corners of music history. This article discusses her life and works, the barriers she had to surmount in order to obtain a musical education, and her prolonged struggle to have her music accepted and critically evaluated on equal terms with that of men.

The fourth of a family of eight children, Ethel Mary Smyth was born in London on April 23, 1858. Her parents were Major-General J. H. Smyth, C.B., of the Royal Artillery, and Nina Struth Smyth, a descendent of Sir Josias Stracey, the fourth baronet of Norfolk.⁴ In 1867, Major-General Smyth was appointed to the command of the Artillery at Aldershot, and the family settled in the nearby village of Frimley.⁵ Since her father had absolutely no talent for music,⁶ Ethel always be-

lieved that her musical instincts were inherited from her mother, whom she once described as “one of the most naturally musical people I have ever known.”⁷

Ethel’s general education was typical of that of a middle-class Victorian young lady. After private tutoring at home under the guidance of a succession of governesses, she spent a few years in boarding school at Putney, where the prescribed curriculum included French, German, astronomy, chemistry, mathematics, literature, history, drawing, music, and home economics.⁸ Very little is known about Smyth’s early musical training. In her memoirs, however, she mentions a governess who introduced her to classical music, and inspired her to set her sights on a musical career. Here is her account of the experience which determined the course of her future life:

When I was twelve a new . . . [governess] arrived who had studied music at the Leipzig Conservatorium, then in the hey-day of its reputation in England; for the first time I heard classical music and a new world opened up before me. Shortly after, a friend having given me Beethoven’s Sonatas, I began studying the easier of these and walked into the new world on my own feet. Thus was my true bent suddenly revealed to me, and I conceived the plan, carried out seven years later, of studying at Leipzig and giving up my life to music.⁹

Ethel immediately announced her plan to everyone around her. The fact that no one

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took it seriously—least of all, her father who muttered “damned nonsense!” whenever she raised the topic¹⁰—did not disturb her in the least. She was confident that one day her ambition would be realized.¹¹ Fortunately, Ethel was a born fighter and rebel, for her father was an arch conservative who held very traditional views about the place of women in society. Like most men (and many women) of the time, he believed that the only appropriate role for a woman was that of housewife and mother.¹² Moreover, although he knew no artists personally, he was convinced that they were people of low moral fibre, and the life that his daughter proposed to lead seemed to him “equivalent to going on the streets.”¹³

Ethel always considered the arrival of the governess who played classical music to her when she was twelve as the first milestone on her road. Five years later, when she was seventeen, the second milestone loomed into sight. The composer of the well-known hymn *Jerusalem the Golden*, Alexander Ewing, an officer in the Army Service Corps, was stationed in Aldershot. Mrs. Ewing and Mrs. Smyth soon became close friends. Informed by his wife of Ethel’s musical ambitions, Ewing requested the aspiring young composer to play some of the pieces she had recently written. To the great annoyance of Major-General Smyth, Ewing proclaimed her a born musician who must begin her formal training at once.¹⁴ In Ethel’s words,

My father was furious; he personally disliked my new friend, . . . and foresaw that the Leipzig idea would now be endorsed warmly by one who knew. The last straw was when Mr. Ewing proposed that he himself should begin by teaching me harmony; but on this point my mother . . . came over definitely into my camp. So it was settled that twice a week I was to drive myself to Aldershot and submit my exercises to his inspection.¹⁵

This happy arrangement worked well for several months. Ewing was a capable and conscientious teacher. In addition to giving his new pupil harmony lessons, he analyzed her compositions and introduced her to the music dramas of Wagner. Inspired by Wagner’s music, Ethel confided to her diary that her greatest desire was to have an opera of her own performed in Germany before she was forty—an ambition fated to be realized at Weimar in 1898.¹⁶

Meanwhile, Major-General Smyth’s dislike of “that fellow,” as he now called Ewing, had become fanatical. Because of his low opinion of the moral standards of artists, he wrongly concluded that Ewing’s interest in his daughter was more amorous than musical, and the harmony lessons were abruptly cancelled.¹⁷ Since the Ewings had already received orders to leave Aldershot, Ethel did not lose much in the way of harmony instruction. But she did learn a great deal from this incident about the problems

she would encounter in overcoming her father’s stubborn resistance to the plan that had dominated her thoughts since the age of twelve.¹⁸

Matters finally came to a head when Ethel was nineteen. One night at dinner, when her parents were discussing which drawing room she should be presented at, she announced that it would be pointless to be presented at all, since she intended to go to Leipzig. Her father was enraged, and shouted melodramatically: “I would sooner see you under the sod.”¹⁹ After a period of vain attempts to win him over, Ethel felt she had no choice but to take drastic action. Recalling this period of her life many years later, she wrote:

I not only unfurled the red flag, but determined to make life at home so intolerable that they would have to let me go for their own sakes. (I say ‘they,’ but . . . I felt that, whatever my mother might say in public, she was secretly with me.) . . . Towards the end I struck altogether, refused to go to Church, . . . refused to speak to any one, and one day my father’s boot all but penetrated a panel of my locked bedroom door!²⁰

Despite his military training, when it came to warfare of this type, the Major-General proved no match for Ethel, and he eventually had to admit defeat.²¹

On July 26, 1877, with her father’s grudging consent, Ethel set off for Leipzig. At the Leipzig Conservatory, she studied composition with Carl Reinecke, counterpoint and other theoretical subjects with Salomon Jadassohn, and piano with Joseph Maas. It did not take her long to discover that the Conservatory was no longer the great educational institution it once had been. Disillusioned with the low standard of teaching, she left after a year, and continued her studies privately with the Austrian composer Heinrich von Herzogenberg, founder and conductor of the Bach-Verein in Leipzig. Through Herzogenberg and his wife Elisabeth (a fine musician in her own right), Ethel met Brahms and Clara Schumann, and soon became part of their musical circle. While in Leipzig, she also became acquainted with Grieg, Dvořák, and Tchaikovsky.²²

When Ethel arrived in Leipzig, she had with her several songs she had composed to German texts. They immediately attracted favourable attention.²³ Encouraged by this recognition of her creative talent, she took the songs to the music publishers Breitkopf & Härtel. Ethel’s account of her meeting with Dr. Hase, the head of the firm, demonstrates the prejudice that professional women composers experienced at the time. In a letter to her mother, she wrote:

He began by telling me that . . . no composer had ever succeeded, barring Frau

Schumann and Fräulein Mendelssohn, whose songs had been published together with those of their husband and brother respectively. He told me that a certain Frau Lang had written some really very good songs, but they had no sale.²⁴ I played him mine, many of which he had already heard me perform in various Leipzig houses, and he expressed himself very willing to take the risk and print them. But would you believe it, having listened to all he had to say about women composers, . . . I asked no fee! Did you ever hear of such a donkey!²⁵

As soon as she began her studies in Leipzig, Ethel was advised by her teachers to concentrate on writing instrumental and chamber music. She composed many pieces in these categories during her student years, but they are rather academic in style, and bear little resemblance to the powerful, more original works of her maturity.

It was as a composer of chamber music that Ethel Smyth made her professional debut. On January 26, 1884, her String Quintet in E major, op. 1, was performed at the Leipzig Gewandhaus. Three years later, her Sonata in A minor, op. 7, for violin and piano was given its first performance in the same hall. Neither of these works was a critical success. The main fault the critics found with the Violin Sonata was that it was “devoid of feminine charm and therefore unworthy of a woman.”²⁶ This was Ethel’s first encounter with sexual aesthetics—the tendency of contemporaneous critics to evaluate a woman’s compositions in terms of their “appropriateness” to her sex.

One who did not agree with the critics’ verdict was Tchaikovsky. In his memoirs, he wrote:

Miss Smyth is one of the comparatively few women composers who may be seriously reckoned among the workers in this sphere of music. . . . She had composed several interesting works, the best of which, a violin sonata, I heard excellently played by the composer herself. She gave promise in the future of a serious and talented career.²⁷

It was also Tchaikovsky who brought to Ethel’s attention a serious deficiency in her Leipzig training: she had received no formal instruction in orchestration. Heeding his advice, she immediately began to study the subject on her own.²⁸ By the end of 1889, she had completed two orchestral works: a four-movement Serenade, and her Overture to *Anthony and Cleopatra*.²⁹

On April 26, 1890, Smyth’s Serenade was included on a programme given at the Crystal Palace in London under the direction of August Manns. This concert was an important landmark in her career, for it was both her orchestral debut and the first public performance of any of her works in her native country.³⁰ While the Leipzig critics had said that her Violin Sonata lacked “feminine

charm,” George Bernard Shaw, then music critic of the *Star*, dismissed the Serenade for its “daintiness”—a supposedly desirable feminine trait. Shaw wrote:

First there was a serenade by Miss Smyth, who wrote the analytic program in such terms as to conceal her sex, until she came forward to acknowledge the applause at the end. No doubt Miss Smyth would scorn to claim any indulgence as a woman, and far from me be it to discourage her righteous pride . . . [However,] I am convinced that we should have resented the disappointment less had we known that our patience was being drawn on by a young lady instead of some male Smyth. It is very neat and dainty, this orchestral filigree work; but it is not in its right place on great occasions at Sydenham.³¹

Six months later, Smyth’s tempestuous Overture to *Anthony and Cleopatra* was given its premiere at the Crystal Palace, again under the baton of Manns. This work fared somewhat better at the hands of the critics. To quote one reviewer, it “showed that she understood all the resources of the orchestra, and that she was no amateur.”³²

Smyth’s next composition, the Mass in D for soloists, chorus and orchestra, was a far more important work. Completed in the summer of 1891, it was first performed on January 18, 1893, by the Royal Choral Society under the direction of Sir Joseph Barnby at the Royal Albert Hall. But Smyth experienced great difficulty in having the Mass accepted for performance. She spent over a year showing the score to various conductors and musical directors of British choral societies, but to no avail. As she later put it:

I found myself up against a brick wall. Chief among the denizens of the Groove at that time were Parry, Stanford, and Sullivan. These men I knew personally, also Sir George Grove; Parry and Sullivan I should have ventured to call my friends. . . . [Yet] not one of them extended a friendly finger to the newcomer—nor of course publishers.³³

Eventually Smyth’s aristocratic connections came to her rescue. The exiled Empress Eugenie of France, a close friend and neighbour, not only paid for the publication of the Mass, but aroused the interest of the Duke of Edinburgh, then President of the Royal Choral Society. Thanks to their help and intervention, the work was given its premiere in the most prestigious concert hall in England.³⁴

The performance was excellent, and the audience wildly

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enthusiastic, but Smyth was discouraged by the reviews.³⁵ She later wrote bitterly that “except as regards the scoring, which got good marks on all sides, the Press went for the Mass almost unanimously.”³⁶ Hardest of all for her to bear was the patronizing, sexist tone adopted by many of the critics.³⁷ “It is but seldom,” said the *Morning Post*, “that a lady composer attempts to soar in the loftier regions of musical art.”³⁸ The *Star* was equally backhanded: “Is a female composer possible? No, says your psychologist. . . . With women, however, it is just the impossible that is sure to happen.”³⁹ Reviewing the performance for the *World*, Shaw wrote:

If you take an average mundane young lady, and ask her what service to religion she most enjoys rendering, she will probably . . . instance the decoration of a church at Christmas. . . . Now I will not go so far as to say that Miss Smyth’s musical decoration of the Mass is an exactly analogous case, . . . but . . . the decorative instinct is decidedly in front of the religious instinct all through.⁴⁰

One critic who did recognize the Mass as a great achievement was J. A. Fuller Maitland. He wrote:

This work definitely placed the composer among the most eminent composers of her time, and easily at the head of her own sex. The most striking thing about it was the entire absence of the qualities that are usually associated with feminine productions; throughout it was virile, masterly in construction and workmanship, and particularly remarkable for the excellence and rich colouring of the orchestration.⁴¹

But, as the above passage shows, not even Fuller Maitland was immune to the all-pervasive influence of sexual aesthetics. In his view, Smyth had created a successful work; therefore, she had composed like a man.

Viewed within the context of its time, Ethel Smyth’s Mass in D stands far above the general level of late nineteenth-century English choral works, not only in terms of the originality of the vocal parts, but also because of its strength of structure and the richness of its orchestration. Nonetheless, it had to wait thirty-one years for a second performance. During the intervening years, Ethel blamed the “old boy’s club” that dominated the British musical scene for the neglect of her Mass. She wrote:

Year in year out, composers of the Inner Circle, generally University men attached to our musical institutions, produced one choral work after another—not infrequently deadly dull affairs—which, helped along by the im-

petus of official approval, automatically went the rounds of our Festivals and Choral Societies. . . . Was it likely, then, that the Faculty would see any merit in a work written on such different lines—written too by a woman who had actually gone off to Germany to learn her trade?⁴²

In one of her many attempts to have the Mass performed, Ethel went to Munich to consult the great Wagnerian conductor Hermann Levi about the chances of a performance in Germany. Levi was much impressed by the work, and detected in it a natural flair for writing dramatic music which led him to suggest that she compose an opera.⁴³ She immediately set to work on a two-act opera called *Fantasio*, based on Alfred de Musset’s play of the same name, and enlisted Henry Brewster, her philosopher-friend and lover, to collaborate with her on the libretto.⁴⁴ Because of the restricted opportunities for opera production in England at the time, Smyth planned from the outset to have the opera mounted in one of Germany’s fourteen opera houses.⁴⁵

When Levi was shown part of the score and told of her plan, he cautioned Ethel that a woman composer would have little or no chance of realizing such an ambition, and therefore advised her to submit the opera under a male pseudonym for an international competition which was to take place in 1895. The first prize was to be a lump sum of money, the publishing of the score, a production of the work in one of the leading German opera houses, and the guarantee of a certain number of later performances. *Fantasio* did not win first prize, but was among seven of the 110 operas submitted to be highly commended.⁴⁶

Ethel was now more determined than ever to secure a production of her operatic first-born in Germany. In the autumn of 1896, armed with letters of introduction from Levi, she embarked on a round tour of the opera houses at Karlsruhe, Dresden, Leipzig and Cologne. *Fantasio* was accepted at Cologne, but this decision was reversed shortly afterwards when Hoffmann, the conductor, realized that no singer in his company could do justice to the difficult title role. Undaunted, Ethel embarked on another tour of German opera houses in the early part of 1897. Acting on a chance suggestion, she sought out the appropriate authorities at Weimar, where, after many delays, the premiere of *Fantasio* took place on May 24, 1898. Three years later, on February 10, 1901, it was also produced at Karlsruhe.⁴⁷

Although *Fantasio* was enthusiastically received, Ethel became convinced that it was a flawed work. As she put it, “I think that there is a discrepancy between the music and libretto—far too much passion and violence for such a subject.”⁴⁸ It is unlikely that *Fantasio* will ever be produced again, for when in 1916 she received all the remaining vocal scores from the publisher (they weighed over a ton), she made a bon-

fire of them and threw the ashes on her garden. A famous gardener had once told her that the ash of well-inked manuscript was an even better fertilizer for flowers than soot.⁴⁹

Directly after the Karlsruhe production of *Fantasio*, Ethel returned to England to complete the full score of her second opera *Der Wald*. The story on which it is based was written by the composer herself, and fashioned into a libretto with Brewster's help.⁵⁰ Set deep in the forest, with its theme of salvation through death, the work owes much to the influence of German symbolist art. *Der Wald* was first performed in Berlin on April 21, 1902.⁵¹ Three months later, it was produced at Covent Garden with great success. Smyth later described the Covent Garden premiere as "the only real blazing theatre triumph I have ever had."⁵²

On March 11, 1903, *Der Wald* gained the distinction of becoming the first opera by a woman to be performed at the Metropolitan Opera in New York.⁵³ The composer helped to prepare the American production, and received a ten-minute ovation on the opening night.⁵⁴ According to one eyewitness account, she was almost buried in floral tributes.⁵⁵ Many critics found it impossible to reconcile the energy and vitality of Smyth's music with those attributes considered "typically" feminine. In the *Musical Courier* of March 18, 1903, for example, we read:

Not as the music of a woman should Miss Smyth's score be judged. She thinks in masculine terms, broad and virile. . . . Her climaxes are full-blooded and the fortissimos are real. There is no sparing of the brass, and there is no mincing of the means that speak the language of musical passion. . . . The gifted Englishwoman has successfully emancipated herself from her sex.⁵⁶

Implicit in such critiques is the notion that Smyth had succeeded as a composer at the expense of her femininity. Indeed, it was a commonly held belief at this time that women who achieved in male-dominated fields such as composition were "unsexed phenomena."⁵⁷

In the summer of 1903, after a rather unpleasant struggle, Ethel managed to convince the Covent Garden Syndicate to stage another performance of *Der Wald*. Although the work was received with almost as much enthusiasm as in the previous year, it was then dropped from the repertoire.⁵⁸ By this time, the composer was hard at work on her third and best known opera, *The Wreckers*.

Generally considered her finest work, *The Wreckers* was inspired by a legend told to Smyth while she was vacationing in Cornwall in 1886. The libretto was written some years later by Henry Brewster.⁵⁹ It concerns the inhabitants of an eighteenth-century Cornish coastal village, who wreck and plunder ships through the use of false lights or the removal of real ones. The principal characters are Mark and Thirza,

two lovers who, by kindling secret beacons, endeavoured to counteract the savage policy of the

community. . . . [They] were caught in the act by the Wreckers' committee—a sort of secret court which was the sole authority recognized [by the villagers]—and condemned to die in one of those sea-invaded caverns.⁶⁰

Completed in May of 1904, *The Wreckers* was first performed on November 11, 1906, in Leipzig. It was also produced in Prague one month later.⁶¹ After several unsuccessful attempts to have the work mounted in various other European opera houses, Smyth wrote: "I have spent years fighting abroad. I have given that up as hopeless. Now I mean to fight for my place in my own country, a place which everyone knows I deserve. But it must be proved."⁶²

It seemed to Ethel that the best way to establish that proof would be to have *The Wreckers* produced at Covent Garden. She therefore submitted the score to the Covent Garden Syndicate, expressing the hope that her opera would be given "fair and sympathetic consideration." Despite the fact that *The Wreckers* had already been performed at two of the leading continental opera houses, she was informed that in future no opera would be produced at Covent Garden that had not established its success abroad.⁶³

Undefeated, as usual, Ethel now decided to make *The Wreckers* better known by presenting a concert version of the first two acts at Queen's Hall in London on May 28, 1908. Brewster, who had written the libretto, insisted on paying the expenses.⁶⁴ According to the press notices, the concert, which was conducted by Artur Nikisch, was a resounding success. Both the orchestration and the choral writing were praised by most of the critics, one of whom went so far as to write that "the scoring is magnificent." In his review, this same critic took one of his colleagues to task for making the patronizing comment that *The Wreckers* was "a remarkable achievement—for a woman."⁶⁵ He wrote:

Indeed! Why, no one in this country, man or woman, has written anything to compare with it for the last fifteen years. . . . I had been to *Madam Butterfly* the night before the *Wreckers* concert. What a poor, bloodless tricky thing the Italian composer's popular opera seems by the side of the Englishwoman's splendidly vital work!⁶⁶

The first London stage production of *The Wreckers* took place in June of 1909, when six performances conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham were given at His Majesty's Theatre. This production, like many other performances of Ethel's works, was financed by her benefactress Mary Dodge, an

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American philanthropist.⁶⁷ The royal family attended the final performance.⁶⁸ A critic for the *Times* wrote:

The strong passionate music that gripped the attention from the opening strains . . . must have startled the skeptic in his unshakable belief that . . . the English temperament [*is*] incapable of being dramatic. Miss Smyth, by the choice of her subject and the strength and sympathy with which she has treated it, deserves to take her place with the English writers whose theme has been the tragedy of the sea.⁶⁹

The next year, Beecham included *The Wreckers* in his first season at Covent Garden.⁷⁰ Discussing this work many years later, he wrote: “[It] is one of the three or four English operas of real musical merit and vitality.”⁷¹

By 1910, all of Ethel Smyth’s major works had been performed, and in that year she was awarded an honorary Doctor of Music by the University of Durham.⁷² She was then fifty-two years old, and just beginning to enjoy the musical recognition for which she had long struggled. But in the midst of this success, circumstances arose which diminished her creative output over the next few years. She was deeply shaken by the death of Henry Brewster—her lover and artistic collaborator.⁷³ As she put it in her memoirs, “I felt then like a rudderless ship aimlessly drifting hither and thither.”⁷⁴ Meanwhile, votes for women had become a major political issue, and, no doubt because of her experiences as a woman composer, she decided to dedicate the next two years of her life to the suffragist cause.⁷⁵

Although she joined late, Ethel soon became a key figure in the Women’s Social and Political Union (W.S.P.U.)—the militant branch of the suffrage movement. She participated in demonstrations, made speeches, wrote articles for suffragette publications, and provided shelter for the charismatic leader Mrs. Pankhurst during the notorious cat-and-mouse part of the struggle. But her most important contribution was her *March of the Women*, a song dedicated to the members of the W.S.P.U. Mrs. Pankhurst was so delighted with the piece that it was immediately adopted as the battle-cry of the movement.⁷⁶

No matter how much she feared the consequences, Ethel felt that she could not keep her self-respect if she did not take the same risks that many other suffragettes were willing to take. So when Mrs. Pankhurst asked for volunteers to break a window in the house of any politician who opposed votes for women, the composer was one of 109 members of the W.S.P.U. who responded. She chose the window of the Colonial Secretary, “Lulu” Harcourt, who had roused her anger by publicly stating that he might agree to votes for women if all women were as well-behaved and intelligent as his wife. Before the constable who was guarding Harcourt’s house could stop her, Ethel’s stone found its mark. She was at once arrested and sentenced to two months imprisonment.⁷⁷

Sir Thomas Beecham went to visit Ethel several times during her confinement at Holloway Prison, and left an amusing account of one of his visits. He wrote:

When I arrived, the warden of the prison . . . was bubbling with laughter. He said, ‘Come into the quadrangle.’ There were . . . a dozen ladies, marching up and down, singing hard. He pointed up to a window where Ethel appeared; she was leaning out, conducting with a tooth-brush, also with im-

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mense vigour, and joining in the chorus of her own song [*March of the Women*].⁷⁸

In addition to *March of the Women*, Ethel wrote two other works for the suffragist cause—*Laggard Dawn* and *1910*. They were included in a concert of her music given at Queen's Hall on April 1 1911—a benefit for the W.S.P.U. When Beecham was unable to keep his promise to conduct, the composer substituted for him on the podium.⁷⁹ In later years, Smyth often conducted performances of her own works.

In the fall of 1913, after fulfilling her two years of service with the suffragettes, Ethel decided it was time to write another opera. Casting around for a suitable subject, she eventually settled on a story by W. W. Jacobs, and fashioned it into a libretto.⁸⁰ To avoid the temptation of further political involvement, she retired to Egypt to compose the score.⁸¹ The result was a comic opera entitled *The Boatswain's Mate*.

Unlike *The Wreckers*, a true music drama in the Wagnerian tradition, *The Boatswain's Mate* is a curious hybrid: the first half is ballad opera (complete with spoken dialogue and quotations from folk songs), whereas the second half is music drama—continuous music. Although it has often been criticised for stylistic inconsistency,⁸² *The Boatswain's Mate* proved to be Smyth's most popular work. It was first performed at the Shaftesbury Theatre, London, on January 28, 1916, by the Beecham Opera Company. Beecham also produced the work at Drury Lane in March of 1919. In later years, it was frequently performed at Sadler's Wells.

In 1913, Smyth began to hear ringing in her ears, and it soon became apparent that she was gradually losing her hearing.⁸³ She managed to complete only four more major works before deafness brought her composing career to an end. These later compositions consist of two one-act operas: *Fête galante* (first produced in 1923 by the British National Opera Co. in Birmingham), and *Entente cordiale* (first produced in 1925 at the Royal College of Music), a Concerto for Violin, French Horn and Orchestra (conducted by Sir Henry Wood at Queen's Hall in 1927), and *The Prison*—a choral symphony based on the philosophical dialogue of that name by Henry Brewster (first heard in 1931 at Usher Hall, Edinburgh, under the composer's direction).

When she realized that she was going deaf, Smyth added a second string to her bow—that of writing. Her literary output was substantial. Between 1919 and 1940, she published ten highly successful books, mostly autobiographical in nature.⁸⁴ She also wrote numerous articles for magazines and newspapers on a wide variety of subjects. One issue she championed with particular zeal was that of equal rights for women musicians. She wrote: "The whole English attitude towards women in fields of art is ludicrous and uncivilized. There is no sex in art. How you play the violin, paint, or compose is what matters."⁸⁵ In recognition of her work as a composer and writer, Smyth was made

a Dame of the British Empire in 1922.

Smyth's friend Virginia Woolf, to whom she dedicated her seventh book, *As Time Went On*, was one of the many literary figures who admired her writing. Although each had long been interested in the other's work, the two women did not meet until 1930, when Smyth paid a visit to Woolf's home. Of their first meeting, Virginia wrote: "[Ethel Smyth] has descended upon me like a wolf on the fold in purple and gold, terrifically strident and enthusiastic—I like her—she is as shabby as a washer-woman and shouts and sings . . . As a writer she is astonishingly efficient—takes every fence."⁸⁶

Ethel was totally captivated by Virginia, and confided to her diary, "I don't think I have ever cared for anyone more profoundly."⁸⁷ Their intense friendship lasted for more than a decade, until it was cut short by Woolf's suicide in 1941. Although Smyth always thought of herself first and foremost as a composer, she was active as a writer and speaker until her death in 1944 at the age of eighty-six.

Ethel Smyth stands out as a major figure in both the history of women in music and the history of English opera. Her music is masterfully crafted, powerful, and more original than that of most of her British contemporaries. No historical survey of British music should be considered complete if it does not include a reference to her two masterpieces—*The Wreckers* (probably the most important English opera composed during the period between Purcell and Britten) and the *Mass in D*. *The Boatswain's Mate*, the Concerto for Violin, French Horn and Orchestra, the String Quartet in E minor, and the chorus *Hey Nonny No* are also among her most distinguished works.

In an age when musically gifted women were expected to confine their creative endeavours to the parlor, Ethel Smyth fought tenaciously for the right to compete with men as a professional composer of operas and large-scale symphonic-choral works. Unlike most of her male colleagues, she belonged to no clique that might have helped to advance her career, and the degree of sexual discrimination she encountered in attempting to get her music performed was formidable. Consequently, much of the time she should have devoted to composing had to be spent in finding ways to circumvent the prejudices of music publishers, conductors, opera syndicates, and the like. She usually had to finance the publication of her music,⁸⁸ and performances of her works rarely took place unless they were instigated by and paid for by the composer herself—or, as often was the case, by her wealthy friends, most of whom were women of pronounced feminist sympathies.⁸⁹ Three women were especially generous to Smyth in this regard: her sister Mary Hunter, the Empress Eugenie, and Mary Dodge.⁹⁰

Considering the many obstacles Smyth had to surmount, there is little wonder that she once wrote:

As regards chances given, may I say with all the emphasis at my command, that but for possess-

Dame Ethel Smyth

ing three things that have nothing to do with musical genius: (1) an iron constitution, (2) a fair share of fighting spirit, and (3), most important of all, a small but independent income, loneliness and discouragement would have vanquished me years ago.⁹¹

In addition to the difficulties she encountered in securing performances and publications of her works, Smyth also had to endure the discriminatory practices of contemporaneous critics: her music was seldom evaluated as simply the work of a composer among composers, but rather, as that of a “woman composer.” Such criticisms worked to keep her on the margins of the profession, and placed her in a double bind. On the one hand, when she composed powerful, rhythmically vital music, it was said that her work lacked feminine charm; on the other, when she produced delicate, melodious compositions, she was accused of not measuring up to the artistic standards of her male colleagues. Commenting on this, she wrote resignedly: “The exact worth of my music will probably not be known till naught remains of the author but sexless dots and lines on ruled paper.”⁹²

After many years of undeserved neglect, Ethel Smyth’s music is finally beginning to enjoy a revival. Both her *Mass in D* and *The Wreckers* have recently been heard in major professional performances in Britain, Germany and the United States, and have been commercially recorded. Several of her other works have also found their way into the concert hall and recording studio. The current renewal of interest on the part of music scholars in the renaissance of English music from the late nineteenth century onwards suggests that the Smyth revival will continue, and that she may yet be accorded her rightful place in the annals of music history.

NOTES

1. Ethel Smyth to Henry Brewster, 1902, quoted in Ethel Smyth, *What Happened Next* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1940), 210.
2. For a complete catalogue of her compositions, see Jory Bennett, “List of Works,” in *The Memoirs of Ethel Smyth*, ed. Ronald Crichton (New York: Viking, 1987), 373–81.
3. Louise Collis, *Impetuous Heart: The Story of Ethel Smyth* (London: William Kimber, 1984), 44; Christopher St. John, *Ethel Smyth: A Biography* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1959), 112; Bruno Walter, *Theme and Variations: An Autobiography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1946), 154; Sir Thomas Beecham, *A Mingled Chime: Leaves from an Autobiography* (London: Hutchinson, 1944), 84–86; Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis, vol. 5: Vocal Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), 235–42.
4. St. John, 1.
5. Collis, 12.
6. Ethel Smyth, *Impressions that Remained* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1919), 1:110.
7. *Ibid.*, 1:48.
8. Jane A. Bernstein, “Shout, Shout, Up with Your Song!: Dame Ethel Smyth and the Changing Role of the British Woman Composer,” in *Women Making Music: The Western Art Tradition, 1150–1950*, ed. Jane Bowers and Judith Tick (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 307–08; St. John, 8; Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, 1:95.
9. Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, 1:85.
10. *Ibid.*, 1:110.
11. *Ibid.*, 1:85.
12. Collis, pp. 14–15.
13. Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, 1:124.
14. *Ibid.*, 1:110–11.
15. *Ibid.*, 1:111–12.
16. *Ibid.*, 1:112.
17. *Ibid.*, 1:112–14.
18. St. John, 13.
19. Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, 1:124.
20. *Ibid.*, 1:124–27.
21. *Ibid.*, 1:127.
22. Bernstein, 308.
23. Kathleen Dale, “Ethel Smyth’s Prentice Work,” *Music and Letters* 30 (October 1949), 329.
24. Josephine Lang (1815–1880) published more than 150 songs during her lifetime.
25. Ethel to Nina Smyth, April 1878, quoted in Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, 1:237. Breitkopf & Härtel apparently had second thoughts about printing these songs; they were subsequently published as her opp. 3 and 4 by C. F. Peters.
26. Quoted in Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, 2:162.
27. Quoted in Collis, p. 44.
28. Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, 2:168.
29. Bernstein, 309.
30. Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, 2:227.
31. Bernard Shaw, *Shaw’s Music*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (London: Max Reinhardt/The Bodley Head, 1981), 2:54.
32. J. A. Fuller Maitland, *English Music in the Nineteenth Century* (London: Grant Richards, 1902), 267.
33. Ethel Smyth, *Female Pipings in Eden* (Edinburgh: Peter Davies, 1934), 38.
34. *Ibid.*, 38–39. For a fuller account of the circumstances surrounding the launching of the *Mass*, see the following: Ethel Smyth, *Streaks of Life* (London: Longmans, Green & Co.), 93–111; see also Ethel Smyth, *As Time Went On* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1936), 167–75.
35. Ethel Smyth, *A Final Burning of Boats* (London: Longmans, Green & Co.), 17.
36. Smyth, *As Time Went On*, 172.
37. *Ibid.*
38. Quoted in Collis, 63.
39. Quoted in *ibid.*, 64.
40. Shaw, *Shaw’s Music*, 2:791.
41. *Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 1910 ed., s.v. “Smyth, Ethel,” by J. A. Fuller Maitland.
42. Smyth, *As Time Went On*, 172–73.

43. St. John, 83.
 44. The only passionate affair Ethel ever had with a man was with Henry Brewster. She also had several lesbian attachments, about which she wrote the following to Brewster in 1892: "I wonder why it is so much easier for me to love my own sex passionately than yours. I can't make it out for I am a very healthy-minded person." Quoted in *ibid.*, 9.
 45. Eric Walter White, *A History of English Opera* (London: Faber & Faber, 1983), 356.
 46. *Ibid.*
 47. *Ibid.*, 356–57.
 48. Smyth, *What Happened Next*, 86.
 49. *Ibid.*, 175.
 50. *Ibid.*, 213.
 51. For a detailed account of the Berlin production of *Der Wald*, see Smyth, *Streaks of Life*, 139–205.
 52. Smyth, *What Happened Next*, 205.
 53. *Der Wald* remains the only opera by a woman composer ever produced at the Metropolitan Opera.
 54. Smyth, *What Happened Next*, 217.
 55. See St. John, 104.
 56. "A New Opera in New York," *Musical Courier* 46 (18 March 1903), 12.
 57. Louis C. Elson, *The History of American Music* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1971; reprinted from the original 1925 edition), 305.
 58. St. John, 105.
 59. Smyth, *Impressions that Remained*, 2:145.
 60. Smyth, *What Happened Next*, 234.
 61. For a detailed account of these early productions, see *ibid.*, 254–86.
 62. Quoted in St. John, 134.
 63. Ethel Smyth, *Beecham and Pharaoh* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1935), 24.
 64. Smyth, *Female Pipings in Eden*, 41.
 65. St. John, 113–14. My emphasis.
 66. Quoted in *ibid.*, 114.
 67. Dodge also bought Ethel a small house and set up an annuity for her which provided her with a modest income for the rest of her life. Smyth, *What Happened Next*, 279–80.
 68. White, 362.
 69. Quoted in Collis, 98.
 70. White, 363.
 71. Beecham, *A Mingled Chime*, 86.
 72. Smyth later received honorary doctorates from Oxford University (1926) and St. Andrews University (1928).
 73. Bernstein, 313.
 74. Quoted in St. John, 131.
 75. Bernstein, 313–14.
 76. *Ibid.*, 314. Smyth adapted and arranged the melody of *March of the Women* from a folk song she had heard while vacationing in the Abruzzi. When the tune was completed, journalist Cicely Hamilton

fitted it with words. St. John, 151.

77. St. John, 154.
 78. Sir Thomas Beecham, "Dame Ethel Smyth (1858–1944)," *Musical Times* 99 (July 1958), 364.
 79. St. John, 159.
 80. White, 363.
 81. Smyth, *Female Pipings in Eden*, 43.
 82. See, for example, the following: Beecham, *A Mingled Chime*, 85; Kathleen Dale, "Ethel Smyth's Music: A Critical Study," in St. John, 301.
 83. St. John, 162–169.
 84. The following is a complete list of Smyth's books: *Impressions that Remained* (1919), *Streaks of Life* (1921), *A Three-Legged Tour in Greece* (1927), *A Final Burning of Boats* (1928), *Female Pipings in Eden* (1933), *Beecham and Pharaoh* (1935), *As Time Went On* (1936), *Inordinate (?) Affection* (1936), *Maurice Baring* (1938), and *What Happened Next* (1940).
 85. Smyth, *Streaks of Life*, 242. Smyth's most important feminist writings are found in *Female Pipings in Eden* and *Streaks of Life*, 231–46.
 86. Virginia Woolf to Saxon Sydney-Turner, 27 February 1930, *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, vol. 4: *A Reflection of the Other Person, 1929–1931*, ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann (London: Chatto & Windus, 1978), 146.
 87. Quoted in St. John, 222.
 88. *Ibid.*, 191.
 89. Smyth, *A Final Burning of Boats*, 19.
 90. Smyth, *What Happened Next*, 279–80.
 91. Smyth, *A Final Burning of Boats*, 16.
 92. *Ibid.*, 54.

For further reading on Ethel Smyth, see Dr. Gates' article "Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't: Sexual Aesthetics and the Music of Dame Ethel Smyth" in the *Kapralova Society Journal* 4, no. 1 (Spring 2006): 1–5.

Dr. Eugene Gates is a faculty member of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto. His articles on women composers and other musical subjects have appeared in the *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, *Canadian Music Educator*, *Journal of the American Liszt Society*, *Music Educators Journal*, *Tempo*, *VivaVoce*, *Czech Music*, *University of Toronto Quarterly*, and this journal.



Koch Records KIC-CD-7742 (2008)

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Kaprál, Kaprálová, Martinů: String Quartets

Škampa Quartet (Helena Jiříková, 1st violin; Daniela Součková, 2nd violin; Radim Sedmidubský, viola; Lukáš Polák, violoncello). Sound Engineer: Jan Lžičař. Recording Director: Jiří Gemrot. Recorded by the Czech Radio (2012). CD Radioservis ČR0618–2.

Václav Kaprál: String Quartet in C Minor (1925)

Of the three composers featured on this recording, Václav Kaprál (1889–1947) is certainly the least known. Father of Vítězslava Kaprálová and pupil of Leoš Janáček, Kaprál enjoyed a multifaceted musical career that encompassed teaching, concertizing as a pianist, writing music criticism, and preparing editions of piano music. Thus the time Kaprál devoted to composition was limited, and he produced about fifty works over the course of his lifetime, the majority of them given over to the more intimate genres of piano solo, vocal, and chamber music.

His String Quartet in C Minor from 1925 is the only such work in his output (though there are two later works for voice and string quartet), and must be counted as one of his most significant compositions. It was dedicated to the Moravian Quartet, the same ensemble who would later work closely with Janáček on his “Intimate Letters” Quartet and give the first performance of Kaprálová’s string quartet. Cast in two movements, the quartet is an ideal introduction to Kaprál’s musical style. The first movement begins with a sense of urgency, passion and drama. Here the music, at times almost orchestral in conception, possesses an unabashedly romantic sensibility reminiscent of Franck and Wagner. These connections are further reinforced by the slow introduction to the second movement, whose opening three-note motive is not only a virtual retrograde of the first movement’s opening notes, but at the same time also recalls the questioning “Muss es sein?” motive from Beethoven’s last string quartet borrowed by Franck in his D Minor Symphony. In Kaprál’s quartet this motive would appear to have symbolic significance akin to a Wagnerian leitmotif; not only does it frame the scherzo-like second movement with a slow introduction and coda, but it also appears early in the first movement in a section marked *Grave*.

The post-romantic language utilized by Kaprál is provided with an additional element not unexpected from an early twentieth-century composer from eastern Europe: melodies with a pronounced folk style. Kaprál’s friend and biographer Ludvík Kundera claimed that Kaprál used actual folk tunes in his quartet, but does not specify which ones were adopted. However, it is significant that the first string quartet of Kaprál’s former teacher Janáček (after Tolstoy’s *Kreutzer Sonata*) had recently premiered when Kaprál began work on his own quartet, and the central scherzo of Kaprál’s second movement prominently features a melody that unmistakably recalls the brisk, often repeated folk-like tune in the first movement of the Janáček. In fact, Kaprál’s melody shares with Janáček both its rhythmic profile and Lydian melodic inflection.

Similarities to Janáček notwithstanding, Kaprál’s string quartet adopts a more integral approach that attempts to blend the seemingly disparate elements of folk song and Wagnerian pathos in a synthesis that is more reminiscent of Bartók rather than the deliberately jarring juxtapositions heard in Janáček’s *Kreutzer Sonata*. The quartet, especially the first movement, may have been a point of departure for Kaprálová when she composed her own quartet ten years later. If Kaprál’s only quartet is not likely

to radically alter our view of the early twentieth century string quartet, its many musical rewards make its rescue from total neglect more than welcome.

Vítězslava Kaprálová: String Quartet, op. 8 (1935)

Kaprál’s daughter Vítězslava Kaprálová (1915–1940) was just twenty years old when she sketched her only string quartet in the summer of 1935 at the family retreat in the village of Tři Studně, shortly after graduating from the Brno Conservatory. She completed the composition by March of the following year in Prague, where she moved to continue her studies at the Prague Conservatory. The work was premiered by the Moravian Quartet at the opening concert of their fifth season in Brno on October 5, 1936.

Up until 2009, when the first edition of the work was published by the Czech Radio, performers had to rely on a handful of conflicting sources: the original autograph and two sets of handwritten parts prepared by unknown copyists. The many discrepancies among these sources, which also included several cuts, made it very difficult to determine the composer’s final intentions with any precision, and the printed edition left a number of editorial questions unanswered. Fortunately, they have been addressed by this recording by Škampa Quartet, which reflects the most recent Kaprálová scholarship and is as close to an authentic interpretation of the work as possible.

The three-movement string quartet is written in a traditional fast–slow–fast scheme, using the formal structures of sonata form (*Con brio*), rounded binary (*Lento*), and theme with variations (*Allegro con variazioni*). The key centers of each movement form a large-scale V–iii–I progression in B-flat major, though frequent modulations and tonal ambiguities leave the harmonic structure somewhat obscured. To a large extent, Kaprálová’s compositional style in the quartet combines Czech-Moravian folk rhythms and melodies along with more modern harmonic techniques, such as the whole-tone harmonies of the Impressionists, and even the extended chords (dominant ninth, etc.) of early jazz. To this list of influences one can add the typical idiosyncratic modulations, tonal ambiguity, and polyphonic voicing, all of which result in a musical language that is distinctly Kaprálová’s.

The quartet opens with an arresting, dense, and tonally vague six-measure introduction marked *Con brio*. The first theme which follows is a grotesque folk dance in F major. Later, a melancholy lyrical theme appears, accompanied by trills in the viola, with a melody and texture so strongly resembling the opening movement of Ravel’s string quartet that it must have served as a model. The staccato third theme is also loosely based on this second theme. These themes are, of course, developed as the movement progresses, but of particular interest is a developmental section that precedes the lyrical theme. Here, fragmented passages from all three themes appear and this lends a certain familiarity to the second and third themes when they are finally stated in full. The rich harmonic

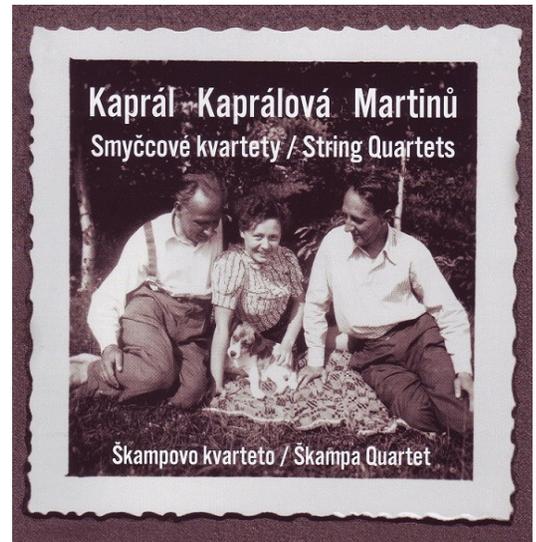
language of the first movement is further developed in the central *Lento* movement which begins with a pensive cello solo in D minor. The mood of the movement is by turns mournful, serene, and eerie, but also yearning and even playful at times, never without the composer's characteristic lushness. The elegant, playful theme of the *Allegro con variazioni* movement begins in B-flat major and is subjected to five variations. In the *Poco meno mosso* variation the theme is "hidden" in the viola's embellished sixteenth-notes and it emerges more clearly in the second variation (*Cantabile*), although now in the distant key of D-flat major. This is followed by a somber and lyrical *Molto meno mosso* variation with the theme again obscured. The fourth variation (*Vivo*) pulsates with a strong rhythmic drive, while changing meters and motivic fragmentation now obscure the theme considerably. The final variation also serves as a coda, and here the theme returns to its more recognizable form, this time in F major. The movement intensifies quickly, and after a series of rapid meter changes, ends strongly in B-flat major.

Bohuslav Martinů: String Quartet No. 5, H. 268 (1938)

The String Quartet No. 5, H. 268, was completed in Paris during the months of April and May, 1938, a time of both great affirmation and great anxiety for Bohuslav Martinů (1890–1959). France, his Czech homeland, and other regions of Europe were facing the advances of Hitler's Nazi forces. At the same time, Martinů's personal life was enhanced by a renewed vitality he experienced as a result of his deepening relationship with his young student, Vítězslava Kaprálová. She reminded him of home and of his youth, serving as the inspiration for the brief instances of lyricism that grace the work. The quartet is among the most private of his compositional efforts, the correlations so great he refrained from publishing the work until the last year of his life. It is likely that, as Martinů scholar Aleš Březina has observed, the delay was motivated by the composer's reluctance to release a work that contrasted so dramatically with his established style of moderation and objectivity. In a letter from 1959, Martinů admitted, in fact, that his opinion was different from others and he had refrained from releasing the work because his ideal lay elsewhere. That he had saved this most private score for two decades must also indicate, however, his realization of its worth. Scholars have deemed it his most significant contribution to the genre, comparing it to Janáček's String Quartet No. 2 "Listy důvěrné" (Intimate Letters) from 1928 and Bartók's Third Quartet, completed in 1927.

The original manuscript provides testament to Kaprálová's involvement. Marginalia contain illustrations and personal thoughts inspired by their intimate relationship. Yet the music itself is severe and aggressive, laden with dissonance amid rare instances of lyricism. Martinů biographer Brian Large regards it as a disquieting score but also the composer's most intellectual. Angry, restless, conflicted, somber, dejected, unyielding, indignant—these are some of the states of mind encountered on the journey through the quartet. The emotional intensity with which the content is revealed indicates that the "stormy inspiration" Martinů acknowledges may indeed go beyond his relationship with Kaprálová to encompass his anxiety at the encroaching wartime threat. In his Double Concerto for two string orchestras, piano and timpani, H. 271, completed later in 1938, Martinů utilizes a similarly aggressive compositional language. Of the latter work the reason is clear, "When I look at my Double Concerto, I have the impression that the atmosphere of tragic events which we remember so well is engraved on the pages of the score, and that in it I even foretold something of the future events that overtook my country." The Concerto's near relative, the String Quartet No. 5, the acknowledged masterpiece among his chamber works, also represents the inner Martinů but on a more intimate level, shaped by a raw romantic passion that is perhaps coupled with a severe dread for the fate of Europe.

Texts by Erik Entwistle, Marta Blalock, and Judith Mabary



The **Škampa Quartet** is among the very finest of an outstanding group of current Czech string quartets. Through its mentors, the legendary Smetana Quartet, the ensemble traces its roots to the earliest quartets, such as the Bohemian Quartet, in a land described in the 18th century as the Conservatoire of Europe and the very cradle of European chamber music. The ensemble has enhanced this heritage with its own well-informed research of the folk song, rhythms, and dances from which Czech national music grew—to the extent that their recordings of the quartets by Smetana and Janáček are considered the benchmarks against which other performances are being measured.

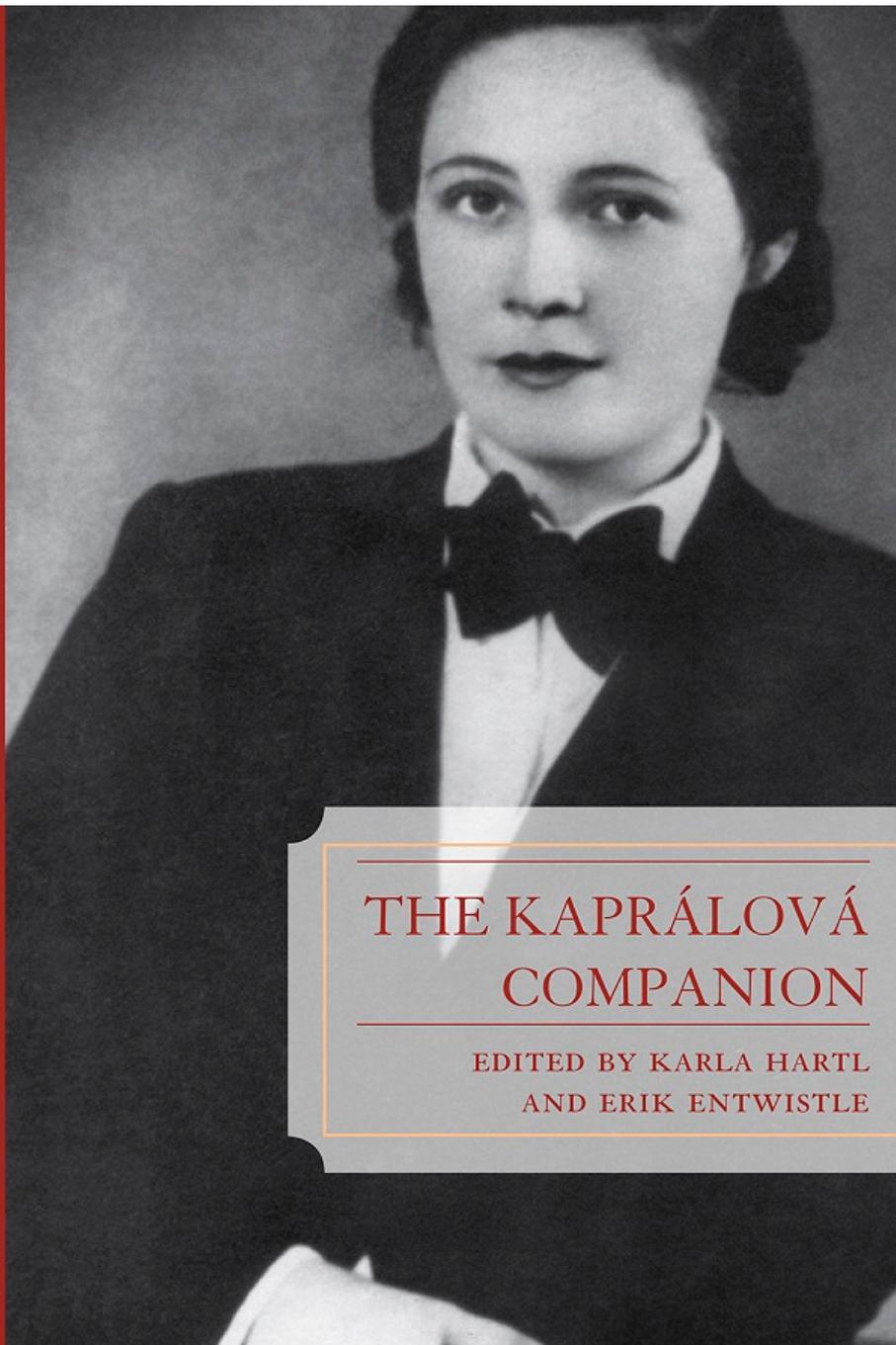
Prizes at international competitions, awards from the Royal Philharmonic Society, and an appointment as the first-ever resident artists at Wigmore Hall attested to the competence of the ensemble's early years and provided recognition which led to invitations to perform at major festivals worldwide, including Prague, Edinburgh, Schwetzingen, Schleswig-Holstein and Melbourne. From the start, the ensemble established close relationship with the BBC Radio 3, resulting in regular broadcasts from Wigmore Hall, St John's Smith Square, LSO St. Luke's and the Chamber Music Proms. Teaching has also been an important part of the ensemble's work, and one that they find particularly rewarding. The members of the Škampa Quartet have taught in many places around the world but most importantly at the Royal Academy of Music in London where in 2001 they were appointed Visiting Professors of Chamber Music.

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Mailing address:
34 Beacham Crescent
Toronto, Ontario
M1T 1N1 Canada

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